

RPG Reload Presents – The History Of Handheld RPGs, Part Nine

[May 5, 2016](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**. This week, we're continuing our little monthly project looking at the history of handheld RPGs. That means that we will not be taking a look at a specific RPG from the App Store's past this time around. Last month, we did the backstroke in the treasure trove that is the PSP's RPG library. It's where the idea of cooperative RPGs truly caught on in Japan, and its successes and failures had a large part in shaping the future course of handheld RPGs. While the PSP was one of the most successful handheld systems of all-time, however, it didn't manage to meet the high expectations many had for its multimedia capabilities. There were many reasons for that, but one of the big ones is the topic of this article. This month, we're taking a look at the early years of smartphone RPGs.

In total, this feature will span twelve columns, each one taking a look at a specific era in handheld RPGs. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I've enjoyed researching and writing them! Please let me know what you think by commenting below, posting in [the Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). If you like this project and wish to support endeavors like it, please consider [contributing to the TouchArcade Patreon](#). It's what makes these kinds of big features possible.

It should go without saying that tabletop, computer, console, handheld, and mobile games are all inextricably tied with each other in various ways. To consider how other platforms contributed to handheld RPGs in these articles would grow them well beyond the scope I'm able to deal with. I'll be mentioning some influences here and there, but this is basically a disclaimer that I'm aware handheld RPGs don't exist in a vacuum, in spite of the

relatively narrow historical focus of these articles.



The History Of Handheld RPGs, Part Nine – We’re Going To Make Some History

When Apple launched the iPod in October of 2001, few could have predicted where it would ultimately lead. After a few relatively slow sales years, the iPod picked up in a hurry once it was made compatible with Windows PCs. It was generations ahead of most popular digital music players on the market, and Apple’s iTunes service soon became the clear winner in the battle of digital music marketplaces. As newer models of the iPod improved the screen, it became the popular digital video player of choice, too. Naturally, you can’t have a piece of electronics and a screen without someone trying to put video games on it, and sure enough, the original iPod had a hidden version of Steve Wozniak’s *Brick* built into it. Within a few years of the original iPod launch, Apple started loading four different games on new devices, easily accessible from the menu.

When iTunes 7 arrived in September of 2006, it brought nine new games

with it that iPod owners could purchase. There weren't any RPGs in the lot, with the assortment mostly favoring puzzle and card games like *Bejeweled*, *Zuma*, and *Solitaire*. The games had to be playable with the click wheel of the device, which while being an issue for action games, wouldn't have been a problem for many RPGs. The basic iPod would eventually get an RPG, Square Enix's *Song Summoner*, but that wouldn't arrive until mid-2008. Things had shifted by then, but if nothing else, the iPod demonstrated that there was a healthy demand for games on Apple's pocket machines. Moreover, the success of the machine emboldened Apple to bring their talents to another new hardware market.

At the Macworld Conference held on January 9th, 2007, then-Apple CEO Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone, a project Apple had been cooking since 2005. While it wasn't the first smartphone device by any means, pre-existing devices like the Palm Treo had failed to crack the wider market. Apple's plan was to make a device that was easy for anyone to use by replacing physical buttons with a large capacitive touch-screen. The iPhone was said to use OS X, which would give it an additional leg-up on other phones. In reality, the OS had shifted to a customized version of OS X that would eventually come to be known as iOS. The device was intended to do everything the iPod could and then some, so it goes without saying it was an impressive multimedia device.



The iPhone launched on June 29th, 2007, with 500 apps available through iTunes, including many games. The device was an instant smash hit. Apple wisely anticipated that some users would get value out of a version of the device with the phone service stripped out of it and launched the iPod Touch in September of 2007. The iPhone App Store launched in July of 2008, and while RPGs only came out at a trickle initially, the floodgates would soon open. Early titles included SoMoGa's port of the SEGA-CD title *Vay*, Com2Us's *Chronicles of Inotia*, Gamevil's *Zenonia*, Gameloft's *Dungeon Hunter*, EA Mobile's *Wolfenstein RPG*, and the obligatory port of *Rogue*.

One of the advantages that the iPhone had over traditional handheld gaming devices was just how easy it was for anyone to publish a game on the App Store. In addition to the relatively big names I've listed so far, we also saw efforts from smaller developers, like *RPG Quest Minimae* from P1XL Games, *The Quest* from Redshift, *Undercroft* from Rake In Grass, *Ravensword: The Fallen King* from Crescent Moon, and *Opal's Quest* from Corelane. Whether from a big, established publisher or a small indie, these games may have varied in complexity and quality, but taken collectively, they made a strong case for RPGs on a touch-only device. It didn't take long for just about everyone to realize that, and as a result, RPGs exploded from 2010 onwards.



Part of that is owed to the April 2010 release of the iPad. Since the iPhone was primarily used as a mobile device and, well, a phone, it wasn't necessarily the best place to play longer, more complex games like RPGs. The iPad, on the other hand, was something people tended to use primarily in the home. Its large screen made text more legible and allowed for busier user interfaces. Players could curl up with the iPad and get sucked into an RPG just the way they could a book, and early iPad RPG releases proved to be big successes. And of course, it wasn't just Apple making hay in the marketplace. Google had arrived with their own Android OS, and it didn't take long for it to become a popular alternative for game developers.

As they had already released a few games on the iPod and had an established history of making mobile games, it was no surprise that Square Enix took a strong interest in the iOS market. You could call 2010 their big coming out party, with iPhone ports of *Final Fantasy 1*, *Final Fantasy 2*, *Secret Of Mana*, and a few others making a splash among mobile RPG fans. Even more importantly, they released their first-ever 3D RPG designed for iOS, the Media.Vision-developed *Chaos Rings*. Unlike their previous mobile games, almost all of Square Enix's output was released worldwide. While

other companies have been hot and cold over the years, Square Enix has never lost their taste for the mobile market. They remain a major part of the mobile RPG landscape even today.



The year 2010 saw a number of other important releases as far as mobile RPGs go. Fireflake's *Dungeon Raid* combined compelling puzzle gameplay with RPG elements to create a fantastic game in the vein of *Puzzle Quest*. While it hasn't been updated in quite some time, it's still playable as of this writing and remains one of the best premium examples of the puzzle/RPG hybrid sub-genre. Another great 2010 release along those lines was GAIA Co.'s *Sword & Poker*, a game that was nearly perfectly suited for on-the-go play. Also of note is *Aralon: Sword And Shadow*, a late 2010 release that showed that iOS could handle deeper PC-style RPGs. Venan Entertainment's *Space Miner* was another stand-out, offering excellent shoot-em-up action with strong RPG elements. Speaking of action games with solid RPG aspects, 2010 also saw the release of the mega-hit *Infinity Blade*.

The following year, 2011, was a critical one. Nintendo launched their new handheld hardware, for one thing. More importantly for iOS, however, is that

it was probably the last year that premium games held a significant share of the mobile market. Many excellent RPGs were released that year, with a nice spread of original titles, sequels to previous mobile releases, ports of popular console games, and even some PC ports. *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Avadon: The Black Fortress*, *King Of Dragon Pass*, *Braveheart*, *Infinity Blade 2*, and countless others arrived, creating a smorgasbord of delights no matter which way your RPG tastes were aligned. Things were changing in the iOS market, however, and that point was underlined for mobile RPG fans with the releases of *Dungeon Hunter 3* and *Zenonia 4* at the end of 2011.



The *Zenonia* series had already been flirting with consumable IAP in *Zenonia 3*, but *Zenonia 4* took it a step farther by releasing as a free-to-play game. Gameloft's popular *Dungeon Hunter* series also went free-to-play with its third installment, and neither of these major mobile franchises would ever have an installment with an up-front price tag on it again. Over in Japan, card collectors like *Rage Of Bahamut* were becoming quite popular on smartphones. It was the 2012 release of Gungho's *Puzzle & Dragons*, however, that flipped one of the big RPG regions on its head. Soon, social RPGs were springing up like wildflowers, greatly outnumbering more

traditional premium titles.

There is one Japanese publisher aside from Square Enix that has held on strong in the face of change, though. Kemco's first release on iOS was 2011's *Symphony Of Eternity*, and they've been cranking out single-player JRPG-style games on a near-monthly basis ever since. Even they had to concede to IAP currencies and ad-supported free versions recently, however. While there are still many examples of premium RPGs making a tidy sum on the platform post-2011, there's no question that as the lights went out on 2012, most RPG publishers had their eyes on the money-printing formula that Gungho had discovered. Amusingly enough, the premium RPG market these days on iOS is largely relegated to the occasional port, Kemco's releases, and indie games. There are worse fates, I suppose.



We're going to leave the mobile RPG market here for the time being. As I've already mentioned, 2011 saw the release of Nintendo's new handheld, the Nintendo 3DS, and the following year saw Sony attempt to follow up their PSP with the PlayStation Vita. In the next couple of chapters, we're going to take a look at those platforms and their contributions to handheld RPGs

before swinging back around to mobile to finish things out. The two machines don't have a lot in common, but both under-performed expectations sales-wise, and both are RPG goldmines.

Shaun's Five For The Premium Smartphone Era

For each part of this series, I'll be selecting five notable or interesting titles to highlight. If you're looking to get a good cross-section of the era in question, these picks are a good place to start.

Avadon: The Black Fortress – The first of Spiderweb Software's games to release on iPad, *Avadon* is an enjoyable CRPG that might look a little low-budget, but plays like gold. Before the Infinity Engine games came to iOS, Spiderweb's releases were the closest things you could get, and are still worthy of your attention years later.

Ravensword: The Fallen King – If you want the better game, play the follow-up, *Shadowlands*. But if you want to understand the history of the genre on iOS, you simply must play this early 3D open-world RPG. It's very simple, but there's a certain charm to it so long as you keep in mind just how early a release it was.

Zenonia – This game is no longer available in the App Store, and that's a shame, because it still works just fine on modern hardware and iOS versions, at least as of this writing. It's a fun action-RPG, if a little grindy. Since it predates retina displays, it's a little blurry on modern iPhone screens, but if it bothers you too much, you can always try out one of the ports of the game available on other platforms.

Song Summoner – Square Enix's entry point into the Apple ecosystem,

Song Summoner is an interesting strategy RPG that allows you to generate heroes from your own music. Unfortunately, this game broke a couple of iOS versions ago, and although Square Enix has yet to remove it from the App Store, they've shown no indication that they intend to fix it. If you have some classic hardware to play it on, however, it's still very enjoyable.

Dungeon Hunter 2 – Whether you like the free-to-play *Dungeon Hunter* installments or not, there's no question that they provide a different experience from the earlier games, which sought to bring a *Diablo*-like experience to platforms without a *Diablo* to call their own. Nothing has released since to fill the hole left by *Dungeon Hunter 2*'s absence on the platform, but perhaps the impending release of *Titan Quest* will help.

That's all for part nine of our on-going *History Of Handheld RPGs* feature. Please let me know what you think by commenting below, posting in [the Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). As for me, I'll be back next week with a look at *The Shadow Sun*. Thanks as always for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *The Shadow Sun* ([\\$0.99](#))